

Riss editorial

January 6, 2016 / Column #1224

CHARLIE MUST DIE!

CHARLIE MUST LIVE!

Something special happened on January 7, 2015, around 11:35. Something we had thought about but never really considered. In 2006, when Charlie published cartoons of Mahomet, nobody seriously thought that it would all end in violence one day. It was unthinkable that in the 21st century, in France, a religion might kill journalists. We saw France as a secular haven, in which it was possible to take the piss, to lampoon, to have fun without a thought for dogmas or lunatics. Without a thought either for the so-called friends who always looked down on us because we were making fun of religion. All these people who were lecturing us to better conceal their cowardice.

The truth is that many people, at that time already, were hoping that someone would put us back in our place. Yes, lots of people were hoping for us to get killed. KILLED. Among them, fanatics made stupid by the Quran, but also bigots from other religions wishing for us to go to the hell they believe in because we dared ridicule religion. Not to mention the backwater of embittered intellectuals, insipid columnists and jealous journalists who take the utmost care in making sure not to tread on dangerous ground by writing anything sincere. That ship of fools and cowards were wishing we were dead. The religious because we were blasphemous, the others because Charlie Hebdo had always been an anomaly in the French media. The founders of Charlie, Cavanna, Choron, Gébé, Cabu, Wolinski, Willem, were outsiders with a God-given talent. And yet they did not believe in God. You can only create what they created, write what they wrote, draw what they drew when you don't give a fuck. About God first and then about everything else. Fuck with appealing to the majority, with seducing the dull masses or charm boring graduates. Fuck everything. Or at least as much as possible. That is the way we had to conceive Charlie for many years. Only for the pleasure of meeting up every Wednesday morning to chat and take the piss, our only defence against those who wanted us dead.

We often thought about death at Charlie. Economic death for one thing. When Charlie first called it quits and went bankrupt in 1982, a daily wrote: "Charlie must die!" The whole press were shitting on Charlie Hebdo. It was even the front-page headline of the last issue. And it was true. The magazine had no more right to exist. Nobody gave a damn. It had been unable to change. Scavengers were rallying around it to be the first to hammer a nail in the coffin.

Death was always part of the magazine. Its reappearance in 1992 was almost against nature. A publication that had folded ten years earlier had no right to be born again. A trial took place at the initiative of Choron, who was yelling that Charlie was dead and that it would not be released again

in his lifetime. Then we had to face the endless trials by fanatical Catholics who were hoping to kill us financially. In spite of their harassment and the dozens of stupid court cases for cartoons of Jesus or the Holy Virgin, the magazine kept running.

The first Charlie Hebdo issues in which we took part, Charb, Luz, Tignous, Honoré, Bernard, Cabu and me were harrowing because we did not know whether the magazine would live on. When we reached issue #100 after two years of a fragile existence, we could not believe it. We were still alive. And at the end of every passing year we were marvelling at the mere fact of still being there. From day one of our reappearance in 1992, I worked with the thought at the back of my mind that we could stop at any time. That the magazine could disappear as quickly as it had returned, in less than a week. I never considered the privilege of expressing my views in a magazine, in our democracy, like it was a given. Nothing is given. To run a paper has always been extremely difficult, from King Louis Philippe, who used to jail journalists and cartoonists, to general De Gaulle, whose censors were banning those who were bold enough to laugh.

Journalists are not the owners of freedom of speech, only its servants. At Charlie Hebdo, freedom of speech never meant hitting back at those who wanted us to die. Our only response to them was creativity. The more inventive and funny would the paper be, the livelier we would be, sending back to nothingness all the people who wanted us dead.

In spite of the security measures taken by the police after the 2011 arson, our taste for life made us forget the fear of death. One month before January 7, I asked Charb whether his police protection was still necessary. The Mahomet cartoons were things of the past, it was behind us. But religion has no knowledge of passing time. It does not count in years or centuries because the only thing it knows about is Eternity. At Charlie, we thought that time had passed and that everything was forgotten. But a believer, especially a fanatic, never forgets the insult to his faith because he has Eternity in front and behind him. That is what we forgot at Charlie. Eternity is what hit us like lightning on Wednesday January 7.

That morning, after the deafening racket of some sixty gunshots within three minutes, silence fell upon the newsroom. Not a word, not a sound. Nothing but the acrid smell of gunpowder. I was hoping to hear cries, wails. But there were none. The silence made me aware that they were dead. Lying on the ground, my eyes fixed to the ceiling, I became aware that Charlie was dead. This time, it was for good. With my feet, I pulled the chair on which Charb was still sitting a few minutes before, in order to place my legs up in the air like I was told in lifeguard lessons. Nicolino was the only one to moan in this lingering silence. I could hear him call for help from time to time. And when finally a fireman helped me to my feet and after walking over the body of Charb, lying by my side, I decided not to turn towards the room to see the dead bodies of Charlie. Not to look at the death of Charlie.

After January 7, many people saw us as zombies, as if we were half dead, half alive. Charlie was decimated but still moving a bit. In the awful period that followed the attacks, a few gentle spirits were kind enough to pretend that given the magazine's financial situation in 2014, Charlie's death was inevitable anyway. According to those bastards, Charlie would only have survived a few months without January 7. To them, January 7 was our lucky day because all of a sudden, the whole of France started to read Charlie. Can you imagine the impact of such claims on the survivors trying to rebuild their lives? Once again, the very existence of Charlie was an anomaly. Even in these

nightmarish moments.

We are often asked: “How can you go on with the magazine after all this?” How? Everything we have been through in the last 23 years is what keeps us going with all our rage. Never have we been so intent on beating up the bastards who dreamed to see us go. Two hooded assholes were never going to destroy the work of a lifetime and the great moments spent with those who died. They will not see Charlie off. It is Charlie who saw them die. The year 2015 was the most horrible in the history of Charlie Hebdo because it imposed the worst torture on an opinionated publication — it tested the values we stand for. Would they be strong enough for us to fight back? The answer is in these pages. The values of atheists and secularists can move more mountains than the faith of believers.